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King's son: Ray

Holds 1st visit with convicted assassin

NEWS WIRE SERVICES

NASHVILLE — The son of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. yesterday told convicted assassin James Earl Ray that he believes Ray did not kill the civil rights leader.

"I believe you and my family believes you," Dexter Scott King told a gaunt and frail Ray during an emotional jailhouse meeting.

Dexter still wanted Ray to reassure him that he was not involved in the 1968 killing of his father.

"I just want to ask you for the record, did you kill my father?" King asked.

"No, no, no, I didn't, no," the ailing Ray said.

The extraordinary meeting in a state prison hospital was the first between the two and marked the first time the King family has publicly backed Ray's claim of innocence.

Ray, 69, was brought to the meeting room in a wheelchair, and at times mumbled and rambled. King, 36, sat just 3 feet away, listening patiently and speaking softly to a man dying of liver disease.

"We are going to do everything in our power to try and make sure that justice will prevail," said King, who was 7 when his father was slain.

The King family has joined the call for a trial for Ray, saying that is the only way they will know the truth about King's assassination.

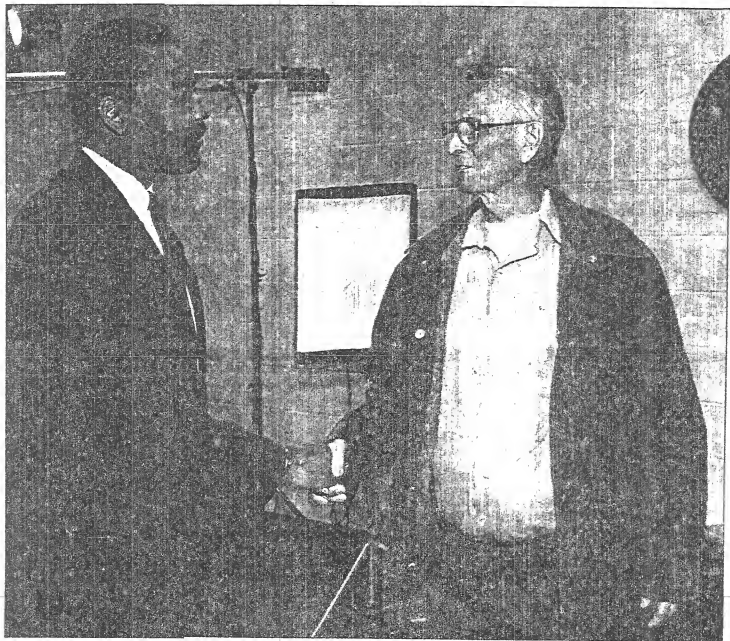
Ray got up from his wheelchair to shake hands for the meeting before a roomful of reporters. The moment was made more eerie by King's striking resemblance to his late father.

After a 25-minute conversation in front of reporters, the

not killer

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TALK: Dexter Scott King, son of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., meets with James Earl Ray yesterday.

two met in private where King hoped to question Ray on numerous unanswered questions about the slaying.

King was shot as he stood on a hotel balcony in Memphis, where he had arrived to help direct a sanitation workers' strike. Ray pleaded guilty to the slaying a year later and was sentenced to 99 years in prison, avoiding a possible death sentence.

He recanted a few days later and has been proclaiming his innocence ever since.

King said his family had always felt the truth of the civil rights leader's assassination was being suppressed, but didn't want to deal with it.

It was Ray's deteriorating health and the urging of the inmate's family that persuaded King to look into evidence collected by Ray's attorney.

Ray contends the rifle found at the murder scene with his fingerprints on it was put there to frame him. Ray said he brought the rifle to Memphis on instructions from a shadow gunrunner he knew only as Raoul. Authorities have never established Raoul's existence.

"I had nothing to do with shooting your father, but you'll have to make your own

evaluation on that," Ray said.

A 1978 congressional investigation concluded Ray, a petty criminal, acted alone.

Ray and his family have sought publicity in the hope of securing a liver transplant, without which Ray will die before the end of the year, according to his doctors.

Until this year the King family had stayed away from Ray's appeals.